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A STUDY OF UNHCR EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE:
PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS FROM THE PERSIAN GULF*

1. In the twelve months which have passed since the Executive Committee last met, massive new population displacements have taken place in the Persian Gulf and the Horn of Africa. These events have not only presented UNHCR and other members of the international community with an enormous practical challenge, but have also stimulated a wide-ranging debate about the capacity of the United Nations to respond to humanitarian emergencies.

2. In order to improve UNHCR's emergency preparedness and response, the Evaluation Section is currently undertaking a detailed study of the organization's role and performance in recent emergency operations. The study is being carried out by a small team of internal and external staff with extensive experience in both the evaluation and overall management of humanitarian emergencies. This conference paper, which is based primarily on an examination of the Persian Gulf crisis, presents some of the team's preliminary conclusions.

1. CO-ORDINATION: A NEED FOR GREATER CLARITY

3. Much of the discussion concerning the UN system's performance in the Persian Gulf has focussed on the issue of co-ordination. This is understandable in view of the many components of the UN system at both

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headquarters and field levels which claimed a co-ordinating or lead agency role. At different phases of the emergency, these included UNDRO, UNDP, UNHCR, the Office of the Secretary-General's Executive Delegate, and the Senior UN Emergency Managers who were appointed to several countries in the region. Inevitably, these claims generated confusion as to who was actually responsible for various elements of the operation.

4. Clarity of roles, however, is not the only issue that must be addressed in future emergencies. Experience in the Persian Gulf has demonstrated the need for a closer integration of the policymaking and operational functions, especially in situations involving delicate protection principles. More attention must also be given to the ways in which UNHCR can operate in situations which do not fall clearly within its mandate.

5. In an emergency, a single operational agency must be responsible for ensuring that all sectors are covered, through its own activities or those of other organizations. Regardless of the goodwill existing amongst the agencies, differences in mandate, policies, procedures and orientation may lead to confusion and inefficiency when a strictly sectoral division of labour is applied to a single caseload. At the same time, competition for scarce resources and public recognition often creates conflict.

6. In recent years there has been considerable emphasis on the need to give specialised agencies responsibility for activities that fall within their sectoral competence, in order to establish a more rational division of labour within the UN, and to ensure that refugee assistance and developmental programmes are properly integrated. UNHCR evaluations have repeatedly underscored the value of this approach, especially when a refugee or returnee situation has moved beyond the emergency phase. As the Persian Gulf operation has demonstrated, it is far less appropriate in the early stages of a crisis, when speed of response requires clear authority and direct lines of command.

7. Attempts to parcel out operational responsibilities to different agencies can only work effectively when those responsibilities do not overlap. In the Persian Gulf, for example, co-operation between UNHCR, IOM and WFP was exemplary. In certain sectors, however, some activities were duplicated, while others were neglected. Significantly, the allocation of responsibilities established in the original UN plan of action for the Persian Gulf proved unsatisfactory. In constructing a more rational formula, UNHCR was eventually nominated as the lead agency, and asked to provide overall operational co-ordination in the field for the refugee and returnee programme.

II. MANAGEMENT METHODS: SPECIAL PRACTICES ARE REQUIRED

8. Regardless of the outcome of current discussions concerning the co-ordination of humanitarian activities, UNHCR may be asked to assume a similar role in future refugee-related disasters. If it is to do this effectively, UNHCR must change its methods of emergency management.

9. Emergency operations cannot be managed as if they were regular programmes running at an accelerated pace. In recent emergencies, efforts to move existing systems and procedures at speeds for which they were not intended

have absorbed tremendous amounts of time, energy and effort. UNHCR must develop management structures, systems and procedures designed to meet the specific needs of these situations.

10. Lessons can be learned from the type of operations undertaken by military forces and civilian emergency services, where the need for a rapid and effective response bears a close similarity to that required of the UN system in a humanitarian disaster. In particular, greater emphasis must be placed on operational objectives, establishing a clear chain of command, decentralization and rapid decision-making. When confronted with a disaster, emergency managers must be able to move away from the consensus and control-based styles appropriate to more conventional and slower-paced activities.

11. Many important principles of emergency management were successfully adopted in the Persian Gulf. Most noteworthy perhaps, was the extent to which overall strategy was consistently oriented towards solutions rather than relief. In addition, emergency operations were separated from slower-moving regular programmes, while considerable decision-making authority was delegated to key in-country staff members. On the other hand, neither the chain of command nor roles and responsibilities in the field were clarified to the extent desirable.

12. In future emergencies, greater efforts should be made to ensure that decision-making at headquarters is concentrated in a small group of people, authorized to take decisions without reference to their superiors. Meetings intended to determine overall policies must be more clearly separated from those designed to take operational decisions or to share information.

III. PREPAREDNESS MEASURES: SPECIFIC STEPS CAN BE TAKEN

13. In addition to modifying management practices, the adoption of a number of general preparedness measures would significantly strengthen UNHCR's emergency capability. These include:

- creating a formal mechanism which enables senior management to declare that an emergency exists, thereby triggering a set of accelerated administrative, financial and staffing procedures;
- stockpiling basic relief items, and establishing a quickly accessible reserve supply of appropriate items such as telecommunications equipment, computers and vehicles;
- negotiating formal agreements with the governments of emergency-prone countries, covering issues such as UNHCR representation, the importation of goods, vehicle registration, the use of radio frequencies and the granting of visas and travel permits;
- establishing prior arrangements with donor states which are willing to provide UNHCR with financial and material resources, as well as logistical support in the early stages of an emergency; and,

- formalizing agreements with UN and non-governmental organizations, as well as national disaster and civil defence corps, regarding their prospective role in emergency operations and the secondment of staff and technical specialists to UNHCR.

14. These measures, designed to increase UNHCR's general level of preparedness, could be taken independently of any efforts to establish the kind of early warning procedures which have frequently been proposed as a means of predicting and preparing for specific refugee movements. Recent experience in the Persian Gulf and other regions of the world has demonstrated the difficulty of making accurate forecasts regarding the location, size and direction of population displacements. Even when such forecasts have been made, it has proved extremely difficult to mobilize in advance the scarce host and donor country resources required for preparedness measures to be taken.

IV. HUMAN RESOURCES: NEW APPROACHES ARE IMPERATIVE

15. The most frequent and serious criticism of UN emergency operations throughout the last decade has been that the right people were not in the right place at the right time. There is overwhelming evidence of the need to ensure that a corps of suitably senior, experienced and trained officers can be sent immediately to the scene of an emergency, with the necessary authority to take decisions. Their presence is vital, not only to guarantee that relief operations are rapidly launched, but also to co-ordinate the work of other agencies and to ensure that technical specialists and less experienced field workers receive proper guidance.

16. Repeated efforts have been made to staff emergency operations through the redeployment of key staff from other functions and locations. This approach, however, has never proved workable. The current initiative for the creation of an expanded emergency staffing capacity within UNHCR (see Conference Room Paper EC/SC.2/1991/CRP.14), would appear to address this longstanding problem. This new staffing system should also be accompanied by a greater acceptance of the need to replace regular programme staff in key posts at headquarters and in the field with emergency staff who possess skills and experience which are appropriate to the demands of the emergency.

17. One of the most innovative and promising initiatives to emerge from the Persian Gulf operation was the mobilization of large numbers of additional UNHCR field staff through a secondment programme funded and organized by the governments and refugee councils of Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Nordic programme greatly enhanced UNHCR's presence and operational capability in the region, and should become an integrated feature of UNHCR's emergency response capacity.

18. There is, however, a danger that the model will be perceived as a panacea to the problem of emergency staffing. The operation has clearly demonstrated that external staff, brought into the organization on a short-term basis, can

only work effectively when regular UNHCR staff members are present in sufficient numbers to guide their work. Initial experience with the programme has also highlighted the need to place greater emphasis on pre-selection and training of seconded relief workers to ensure that they can be effectively and smoothly integrated into demanding operations.

V. STAFF SUPPORT: MORE SYSTEMATIC EFFORTS ARE ESSENTIAL

19. If they are to perform successfully, all staff, whatever their origin or status, must be provided with adequate support upon their arrival in the field. Innumerable examples can be found in the Persian Gulf and other recent emergencies where there was a critical lack of vehicles, communications equipment, office facilities, and even, in some circumstances, shelter, food and clean water.

20. As part of its general emergency preparedness measures, UNHCR must adopt a professional and comprehensive approach to staff support, including the development of more advanced, purpose-designed mobilization packages which would facilitate the work of both staff members and operational partners.

21. Despite the emphasis which UNHCR has placed on emergency training in recent years, relatively few staff with advanced training have been deployed in emergency situations. It has become increasingly evident that existing emergency training programmes need to be reviewed and better targeted towards teams of staff members who are most likely to work in emergency situations.

22. More systematic efforts are also required to develop and disseminate packages of background, briefing and training materials. On too many occasions, UNHCR and agency staff members in isolated locations have found themselves without essential guidance.

VI. MATERIAL RESOURCES: NEW ARRANGEMENTS SHOULD BE ESTABLISHED

23. Recent emergencies have demonstrated that it is difficult for UNHCR alone to provide the material resources required to meet the needs of a large-scale and rapidly evolving emergency. While the recent enlargement of the Emergency Fund and the current initiative to establish a stockpile of basic relief items will undoubtedly enable the organization to respond more effectively (see Conference Room Paper EC/SC.2/1991/CRP.14), it will still be constrained by its limited logistical capacity.

24. In order to mobilize material resources, UNHCR must establish arrangements which will allow the UN system to draw on the relief capacity of states. The extent of this capacity was amply demonstrated in the Persian Gulf, where, in comparison with other recent refugee emergencies, there were relatively few shortages of relief supplies. The need to guide and co-ordinate inputs, however, was clearly demonstrated by the extent to which relief items were poorly targeted, inappropriate to needs and provided in excessive quantities.

25. The United Nations has the potential to greatly improve its response to humanitarian disasters. Experience has shown, however, that interest in

emergency preparedness wanes as other priorities present themselves, particularly during periods of financial austerity. Hopefully, the emergencies witnessed over the past twelve months have conclusively demonstrated the need for UNHCR to improve its standby response capacity. UNHCR must accept that its effectiveness as a humanitarian organization will to a large extent be judged by its performance in emergencies.